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Mourning Mothers and Seeing Siblings

Feminism and Place in *The Juniper Tree*

Pauline Greenhill and Anne Brydon

> *Narrators are free to vary or extemporize on the elements of the tales, which nevertheless constantly reassert themselves.*
>
> A. S. Byatt, 2004 (xxii)

Folklorists contend that some stories can be traced through time and space yet retain their fundamental form even in the face of different tellers' cultural and symbolic inflections. Indeed, a few fairy tales, like "The Juniper Tree" (ATU 720), have been extensively told and retold in genres other than their primary oral and written forms. They contain multiple messages, explicit or tacit, for tellers and audiences, which can refer to individual psychology, performance context, and/or underlying cultural patterns, among many possibilities. Given the extreme variability within the genre, what light can a filmed interpretation shed on this story and its meaning?

The two authors explore this terrain. We examine "The Juniper Tree," most famously documented by the Grimm brothers, using the 1990 film version by the late American director Nietzchka Keene as our fulcrum.[1] How does a telling by an American woman writer, director, editor, and producer who chose to film a German version of this international tale in

We thank Dorinda Hartmann of the film and photo archive at the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research for assistance with Nietzchka's Keene's papers and Juliette Loewen for locating relevant materials from M2005-051/WCFTR, boxes 4 and 5. Lára Jónsdóttir made relevant portions of Keene's Fulbright application available to us; Ingunn Ásdísardóttir, Bryndís Petra Bragadóttir, Jesse Byock, Valdimar Örn Flygenring, Robert Guillemette, and Dominique Poulain graciously offered their memories of Keene and the film's creation.

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Iceland with Icelandic actors speaking English elaborate the narrative? What does this telling make of the story? Anne considers the film's geographic location in terms of social history and cultural interpretation, and Pauline focuses upon feminist analysis. Each perspective opens to the other, but neither fully encapsulates the film nor the filmmaker's intentions.

Nietzchka Keene (1952–2004) received her BA (1975) in Germanic linguistics from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and her MFA in film production (1989) from the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), though she began her graduate work there in folklore, specializing in the folktale. While at UCLA, she completed three short films but also continued her involvement with old Icelandic language and literature, which she developed while working as a research assistant for archeologist and saga scholar Jesse Byock. Although her successful application for a 1985–86 Fulbright Fellowship to Iceland describes a less ambitious short film of a legend from Jón Árnason's nineteenth-century collection of Icelandic tales (1993, 2: 274–76), Keene apparently already intended to shoot a film based on the Grimms' "The Juniper Tree." According to production manager Ingunn Ásdísardóttir and others, film shooting took place during the summer of 1986, with a return trip to record additional sound. The editing was completed in 1989, and the film was released in 1990. Keene described her work as "focused on the enduring power of folklore in modern life" (Memorial Resolution). Her concern to represent folklore in film is evident, for example, in her script for a "Sleeping Beauty" film and her plan to make a movie of the legend of nineteenth-century American female serial killer Belle Gunness.[2] Keene taught at the University of Miami and then at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Tragically, she died of pancreatic cancer on October 20, 2004, at the age of fifty-two.

Keene's film is only one of many interpretations of this tale outside oral and written traditions. Barbara Comyns's contemporary novel *The Juniper Tree* (1985) eschews all but the realistic elements. Micheline Lanctôt's Canadian/Quebeçois film version, *Le Piège d'Issoudun* (*The Issoudun Exit/Trap* [*Juniper Tree*]) (2003) is likewise present-day realist but includes the tale's marvelous aspects in a play within the film. The story has spawned two

1 Keene's Wisconsin archive files contain reviews from local newspapers and trade periodicals, generally without full citations. We provide the information available in the text.

2 On Gunness, see Langlois (1985). Keene's TV film *Heroine of Hell* was released in 1996; her feature film *Barefoot to Jerusalem* was released posthumously in 2008.

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operas, one composed in 1984 with libretto by Arthur Yorinks and music by Robert Moran and Philip Glass (Glass n.d.), and another by Rodney Watkins and Patricia Debney (see Meph 1997, 42). T. S. Eliot's poem "Ash Wednesday" riffs on "The Juniper Tree," and a quotation from that poem forms the prologue for Keene's film (see Traversi 1976). Performance and video artist Joan Jonas aims for "reinterpreting Grimm's fairy tales" in her 1976 *The Juniper Tree* (see Hanhardt 1990, 439) as does writer/director Wendy Kesselman in her 1983 *The Juniper Tree: A Tragic Household Tale* (see Mankin 1988, 50). This is a narrative that many find compelling.

Distinguished Grimm scholar Maria Tatar calls "The Juniper Tree" "probably the most shocking of all fairy tales" (2004, 209). But one wonders why she singles it out, given her oft-quoted inventory of the genre's "murder, mutilation, cannibalism, infanticide, and incest" (1987, 3). The problem can't be the murderous mother; lots of fairy tale (step)mothers practice bad behavior toward their (step)children. Is it the father's greedy, unknowing, incestuous cannibalism that takes this one over the top? Is it the almost campy horror of the stepmother decapitating her stepson by smashing the lid of a chest on his neck, then persuading her daughter that she's literally knocked his head off, combined with the boy's revenge by dropping a millstone on her? Whatever prompted Tatar to make this claim, tellers and theorists alike have found "The Juniper Tree" extremely tractable.

Unlike the majority of their tales, the Grimms collected "The Juniper Tree" from a male teller, Romantic artist Philipp Otto Runge (1777–1810).[3] Perhaps not surprisingly, then, male characters prevail, and the two female protagonists are polarized as nearly literal angel and devil. The Grimm version allies a young boy, his father, and his stepsister against his stepmother, and the story closes with their mother-absent, nuclear family. Tale scholar Hans-Jörg Uther summarizes the traditional narrative:

> A childless couple wishes for a child. A boy is born but his mother dies. The little boy is slain by his cruel stepmother who closes the lid of an apple chest on him. . . . She cooks him and serves him to his father who eats him unwittingly. . . . The boy's stepsister [Marlene

3 Many Grimm tales were collected from women (Zipes 2002a, xxix). Though its traditional credentials have been questioned (Byatt 2004, xxii), "reviewers and friends [of the Grimms] repeatedly singled out 'The Juniper Tree' . . . as . . . a quintessential *Märchenstil,* or fairy tale style, that captured the vitality of a poetry of the people even as it conformed to highbrow aesthetic standards. . . . [It] became the gold standard by which other tales in the collection came to be measured" (Tatar 2004, xxxix).

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> in the Grimms' version] gathers up his bones and puts them under a juniper tree. . . . A bird comes forth and sings about what happened. It brings presents to the father and the sister and drops a millstone on the stepmother, killing her. . . . The boy is resuscitated. (2004, 1: 389)

In Keene's film, two sisters, Katla (Bryndís Petra Bragadóttir) and Margit (pop singer Björk Guðmundsdóttir in her feature-film debut), flee the region where their mother has just been burned for witchcraft. The elder, Katla, plans to find a man to take care of them, intending to bind him with spells. Her choice is a widower, Jóhann (Valdimar Örn Flygenring), whose son, Jónas (played by a girl, Geirlaug Sunna Þormar), is immediately suspicious. But the younger sister, Margit, bonds with Jónas over their shared grief at the loss of their mothers. Margit has regular visions of her mother (Guðrún Gísladóttir).[4] She convinces Jónas that a feather on his mother's grave was placed there by her as a charm. But all Katla's attempts to get along with Jónas fail. He repeatedly calls her a witch—not without cause since he witnesses her casting a spell to ensure pregnancy and wonders at his father's seeming enchantment. Jónas resists all his stepmother's attempts to gain power in her relationships with him and his father.

Eventually a pregnant Katla taunts Jónas to show how his mother will protect him if he leaps from a cliff. He falls and dies. Katla sews one finger from Jónas's body into his mouth and puts another into a stew for the family. Margit finds it and does not eat any stew, though Jóhann and Katla do. When a raven appears on a tree that grows from the mother's grave, where Margit buried Jónas's finger, she tells Jóhann that Katla killed his son. Katla flees, but at the film's end, Jóhann has gone in search of her with the apparent intention of resuming their relationship. The final scene focuses on Margit. Her voice-over tells the haunting tale of two children whose mother was a bird, and whose human father fails to recognize them when they return from the land of the birds. "And so they stayed behind, and they knew what the birds know."

Keene's version emphasizes women's experiences far more sympathetically and with greater nuance than does the original tale. The film's art director, Dominique Poulain,[5] noted women's perceptions as central to the film. In Keene's hands, *The Juniper Tree* examines the fraught relationships within

4 The story described in Keene's Fulbright application was about the *draugar,* whom she described as "actual corpses risen from their grave . . . walking dead [who] must be laid to rest in order to give peace to an individual or a region" (n.d., 3).

5 Dominique Poulain's name is mispelled in the film's credit as "Polain."

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a family awkwardly patched together by grim circumstances. But she also included historical experiences of women in situations of social need and strife. Shooting in various museums and farms in Iceland, Keene aimed for a mood of melancholia and loneliness, rather than a specific interpretation of the tale. As Poulain pointed out, the ending is deliberately ambiguous; whatever follows only deepens the damage that has already rocked the characters' lives. Though interpersonal pain informs all its relationships, the film offers a commentary on the tenuousness of social connections and the enduring succor derived from the imagination's links to the spirit.

Keene confessed to a longstanding fascination with the gory horror of "The Juniper Tree," explaining that it "had been one of my favorite stories as a child. One of the things I really like about it, it's really gruesome" (2002). Her version is simultaneously distinctive and traditional. She sticks quite closely to the Grimms' narrative, and yet she chose to film in Iceland, where no version of the tale was found by the collectors' contemporary, Jón Árnason, or other gatherers of folk narrative. Elements of the film and its context resist the interpretation that it is an Icelandic version of "The Juniper Tree." In Keene's telling, the characters' motivations cannot easily be read; the acting looks flat and emotionless. In one reviewer's interpretation, "the actors are playing archetypes, not characters" (Fred Haeseker, *Calgary Herald,* 1991), and indeed their lack of expression gives the film an archetypal quality it shares with many folktales. Another commented, "Ignoring conventional storytelling niceties, [Keene] concentrates on moments of abject despair, brutal confrontation, intense privation and mystical insights" (McCarthy 1991, 70).[6]

The lack of overt psychological definition and focus on narrative highlights are consistent with the Grimm tales, where "schematic characterization leaves a gap into which the [audience] may step" (Warner 1994, 23). Robert Guillemette, the film's still photographer, commented that Keene first and foremost wanted to tell a story. Thus, the film's viewers, like the tale's hearers, are implicitly invited to attribute meanings on the basis of their own concepts, ideology, or psychology and fill in inchoate elements. Such moves fit well with feminist theorist Teresa de Lauretis's notion that women's cinema is moving toward "an aesthetic of reception, where the spectator is the film's primary concern" (1987, 141). Nonetheless, not all

6 Consider Tatar's evaluation of the Grimm version as "evocation of sheer dread" (1999, 183).

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viewers find the film's lack of inflection compelling; it subverts audiences' expectations that they can rely on clues of character and motivation to interpret behavior that otherwise appears obscure or ambiguous.

Somewhat surprisingly, fairy tale and film scholars have overlooked Keene's film, despite its 1995 release on VHS and 2002 reissue on DVD. Moreover, it won several awards and was screened at festivals in Canada, the United States, and Great Britain, attesting to its merits as an art film. However, now dropped from the art-house circuit, it primarily attracts younger viewers who are fans of Björk.[7] Reading their online discussions reveals clashing views of its merits, primarily due to the writers' lack of familiarity with the demands of non-Hollywood cinema and (with a few exceptions) the traditional tale on which it is modeled. While some are receptive to the film's alternative aesthetic, others dismiss what they view as bad acting and storytelling and express impatience with its deliberate pace (*The Juniper Tree,* 1990).

Reviewers were also ambivalent. Some described *The Juniper Tree* primarily in terms of atmosphere and mood, citing its "ascetic style and eerie subject matter" and "gothic quality" (*Boston Globe,* March 31, 1991); "psychological and spiritual suggestiveness" (Fred Haeseker, *Calgary Herald,* 1991); and "stoic purity" (*Deadlock,* St. Louis, 1991). Many linked Keene with her acknowledged northern influences—directors Carl Dreyer (Denmark), Ingmar Bergman (Sweden), and Andrei Tarkovsky (Russia)—suggesting that her aesthetic invoked the high-art seriousness of European cinema. Indeed, Peter Birnie (in the tabloid *Vancouver Sun*) cynically deflated what he saw as West Coast therapy-speak masquerading as high art. In his reading of the film as a parable of blended families gone wrong, he sarcastically questioned Jónas's motivation for his hatred of Katla: "Is it because she's a witch, or because he's a 14th-century latchkey kid who failed to undergo ego separation from his dead mother?" (December 2, 1992). While displaying his animus toward film-school graduates, Birnie nonetheless touched on an issue that at least one other reviewer noted, namely the problems arising when a film "transplants contemporary tensions—sexual tensions and family tensions—into a medieval setting" (*Boston Globe,* March 31, 1991). Most, however, sympathetically acknowledged the patience required from viewers of this "bravely counter-hip" film with its stark black-and-white visuals and formalist, restrained camerawork reliant on the medium shot.

7 Her involvement probably explains the film's continuing availability on DVD.

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This last reviewer, Johanna Steinmetz, commented that Keene uses "the movie's desolate Icelandic location to develop sinister tension. This turns its stiff presentation into something more choreographed than directed, possessing all the formal grace of a Japanese No tragedy" (American Originals).

Reviewer Angela Baldassarre—rather unusually among her colleagues—interviewed Keene, providing vital clues to the director's vision. Her deliberate aesthetic suggests a personal and psychical expressiveness: "I like bleak. I really wanted to use cinema as an art form, that's very important to me. I made what was in my heart, essentially." Keene's feminism was manifest: "I'm also very interested in bringing people into a very female state of mind. Particularly Margit—she's going through something very mystical and visionary. I put her through a particular age, puberty, where things are more possible" (Baldassare 1993). Elsewhere, Keene articulated her concern with the persistence of folk beliefs and magical influences during times ideologically construed as secular and rational. She understood stories as malleable: their telling is a function where, as anthropologist Albert Doja puts it, the "contents of thought are always subject to being transformed into signifiers" (2006, 20).

Films by women who serve simultaneously as producer, writer, director, and editor are rare. In the U.S. and Britain, only 7 percent of film directors are female (Krum 2006). Feminist film theorists have argued that women directors' works undermine the expected economy of film creation and viewership in which the male voyeur consumes the female object.[8] A female auteur like Keene may create alternative perspectives that speak to female desires, both sexual and gendered. As feminist film theorist Anneke Smelik suggests, "Many feminist directors self-consciously play on the tradition that has made women into a visual object" (1998, 23). Keene accepts this challenge by turning the men-and-mothers focus of the Grimm tale into a portrait of women and siblings. But her location of the tale in Iceland encapsulates her deliberate effort to dislocate it from any readily apprehended time or place and render it, paradoxically, more universal.

Icelandic Connections

The reason I think it fit in so well with Iceland is partly the going back and forth between the world of the dead and the world of the living. One of the places we shot . . . the people

8 We refer to Laura Mulvey's (1975) classic discussion of the male perspective in cinema and acknowledge extensive critiques of the concept (including Mulvey 1981; Doane 1991; hooks 1992; and Clover 1992).

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> *who owned the farm said . . . "we had a film that shot here about six years ago but they shot over two weeks and it rained every day. So the spirits in the rock must really like you because you have great weather." . . . Just sort of a dreamy quality which for me works in terms of Icelandic folklore. . . . I wanted to create another world, which is one of the reasons I shot in black and white. I looked at it as a film of texture, which the Icelandic landscape plays very well in the black and white.*
>
> Nietzchka Keene, 2002

Given Iceland's recent popularity as a fashionable tourist destination and home to pop-music innovation (the country's 2008 bankruptcy tarnished that fashionableness but not the popularity since exchange rates have benefited foreign visitors), it would be an easy, but mistaken, leap to characterize Keene's choice of film location as an attempt to capitalize on this trend. However, that image of Iceland is a more recent creation (see Brydon 2005). When Keene first traveled there in 1985, it was still an insular and homogeneous society of 225,000, with an economy based on fishing and farming and an urban life that was yet to experience the excesses of wealth wrought by market liberalizations in the early 1990s and bank privatization in 2002, or the more recent economic collapse. Not until a decade later did the effects of tourism, immigration, and new media turn the country's stark, dramatic landscape into a familiar backdrop for TV commercials and fashion shoots. Instead, Keene encountered a challenging locale. For example, no cameras or lights could be rented on location, so Keene had to ship what she needed from the United States at considerable expense. Given her nearly nonexistent budget—Keene herself largely financed *The Juniper Tree,* and those involved often joked that it was not "low budget" but "no budget"—that the film was produced at all remains a remarkable achievement.

Nevertheless, Iceland offered advantages to the filmmaker. She benefited from the sheer eccentricity of a foreign woman embarking on such an unlikely adventure. Those who knew and worked with Keene declared their admiration for her focus, determination, and passionate commitment to the film. That Icelanders recognized her drive—a trait that they considered propelled their own society—further suggests a need to shift any thinking about the film's local connections away from cultural associations and toward the social relationships that surrounded its making, shaped by the particularities of the performing arts in Reykjavík in the mid-1980s.

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The best example of the film's distinctive development is casting Björk as the central character. The director met the singer through Robert Guillemette, an immigrant from Normandy whom her UCLA contact Jesse Byock knew, and French national Dominque Poulain, then working in theater. Björk was patching together a livelihood after the breakup of her first band, Tappi Tíkarrass, and had yet to achieve popular success at home, much less abroad. She was eager for the novelty of participating in a film project, despite the token amount it paid.[9] Initially a younger girl cast to play Margit cut her hair in disobedience to the director's explicit instructions. Keene realized that actor would be too difficult to work with and began searching for an alternative. Although Björk was about eight years older than the character she played, her postpartum plumpness suggested the fullness of a girl entering puberty.[10]

Keene also benefited from the regulations governing actors' union membership. Bryndís Petra Bragadóttir and Valdimar Örn Flygenring had just finished acting school. They had both achieved recognition in the theater, but to gain union membership, they needed to appear in three productions following graduation. Despite the low pay and difficult conditions of the shoot, both actors are adamant that making the film was a career highlight for them. Close bonds formed among the crew and actors, and Keene generated a sense of creative adventure.

Both Guillemette and Poulain make clear that Keene did not want *The Juniper Tree* interpreted as a historicized Icelandic story. In Guillemette's words, she sought a sense of "always and never," a mythical nowhere that conveyed the transhistoric truths of human existence. For example, though Keene used a reconstructed premodern house in the national museum as a shooting locale, she removed all but the most minimal props to avoid too many intrusive historical details. Further, using actors with another first language to speak English dislocates their speech for the Euro-North American viewer. Keene repeatedly rehearsed the cast's lines until the disparities in their accents were smoothed over. In an interview in the Icelandic press when the film screened there in 1993, she also admitted that using Icelandic actors speaking English was a means to create a mood of cultural difference and distance *(Morgunblaðið,* February 12, 1993, 42–43).

9 Her honorarium of $2,673 was the largest in the cast, slightly higher than Bryndís Petra Bragadóttir's at $2,263. Valdimar Örn Flygenring got $1,458.

10 Björk's son, Sindri, was born a few months before shooting began.

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Non-Icelandic viewers' lack of familiarity with the landscape—at least at the time when the film was shot—also ensured that this primary audience would be unable to place the setting. The unpopulated starkness of the lava fields conveys little information about season, heightening the disorientation. Despite her notion of the location as unrecognizable, it's clear that Keene conceptualized the Icelandic landscape in her screenplay. Specifically noted are rocks, hills, small lakes, ducks rising from the water, ravens wheeling overhead, glaciers, rivers, and caves. Though by no means unique to Iceland, their presence is explicit in instructions like "Margit is walking by the seashore, gathering seaweed by the basalt columns"; "she is walking by a glacier. The wall of the glacier is formed of dripping black crags"; "it is very windy and she walks along the basalt columns"; "she . . . pulls some seaweed over herself for a cover"; "Margit walks through a stony field"; "they disappear into a waterfall"; "Margit goes back to the lava-field"; "Jonas runs down to the water at twilight. He wades through, slashing at the reeds (grass) with his arms"; or "a pink light crosses through the northern lights" (undated script). Keene uses the Icelandic landscape to underscore the mood of melancholia and otherness. The treeless expanse dwarfs the characters. For European and North American viewers, the absence of a middistant wood emphasizes the difference between the vastness of sky and land and the isolation and frailty of the individuals who bridge the space between. The film's black-and-white images reinforce this melancholic aspect.

Keene was also attracted to Iceland as a logical continuation of her interests in mythology and folklore. Her familiarity with Old Norse literature drew her, as it has other scholars. The sparse population and continuity of place names allow an imaginative entry into events described in the sagas, written down as early as the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.[11] The persistent—but by no means naïve—beliefs among Icelanders about stories of magical nonhuman beings from elves and trolls to witches and ghosts also compelled her. Keene could draw upon archival records of magical practices and rhymes, and the historicized costumes also gave the film a certain mood.

In Keene's treatment, "The Juniper Tree" transforms into a dark meditation upon the loss of connection to others in an era of persecution. Keene quoted actor Guðrún Gísladóttir, who plays the ghost of Katla and Margit's

11 Interested non-Icelandic-speaking readers can begin exploration of the sagas and the vast literature on them through *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* (Hreinsson et al. 1997). Selections from these five volumes appear with an excellent introduction by Robert Kellogg and suggestions for further reading in *The Sagas of Icelanders* (2000).

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mother, as saying "that she thought that it was one of the most Icelandic film topics she had seen when she agreed to be in it. . . . But she just felt it was very true to the spirit of Icelandic folklore" (2002).[12] Nonetheless, the film's depiction of witches particularly suggests that it is not intended to be understood—particularly by Icelanders—as an Icelandic story but instead as a general/universal narrative. Given her academic background and extensive research, Keene was undoubtedly aware of the marked differences between the documented persecution of women in continental Europe and the witchcraft craze in Iceland. There, as elsewhere, the witchcraft trials between 1554 and 1720 and executions between 1625 and 1685 occurred in an era of considerable danger from religious and legal authorities. Murder, incest, adultery, theft were all subject to capital punishment. To be caught with a piece of vellum inscribed with runes—a bit of magic to protect one's life when rowing at sea to fish—could lead to an accusation and conviction for witchcraft (Flowers 1989). Yet during the Catholic era, church authorities tolerated pagan folk beliefs and practices, including the myths of Ásatrú, the old religion of the Norse gods. Indeed, many practitioners were members of the clergy.[13] Nevertheless, about 350 witchcraft trials took place, but in the 125 surviving trial records, only 9 record accusations directed at women, and only one of twenty-six individuals burned was a woman.

Literary scholar Matthías Viðar Sæmundsson (1992) notes that in Iceland, as distinct from elsewhere in Europe and North America, solitary poor women were unlikely to be accused of witchcraft. The majority of Icelanders lived in isolation on farms, and poverty was ubiquitous. Further, the practice of using runes and magical symbols, which could lead to witchcraft charges, was dominated by men because it related to their gendered control of language and knowledge. Yet other aspects of Keene's film resemble Icelandic belief systems more closely. While white magic protected you and your property from hostile forces or restored the natural order of life, black magic usually destroyed and attacked, although it could both harm

12 Those translated into English show that Icelandic traditional narratives include material about ghosts and child murder (Hallmundsson 1987; Simpson 1972), but not all stereotype women as negatively manipulative (Waters 2002; Simpson 1972).

13 In about 1536, a small-scale religious war took place in Iceland between Catholics and Protestants. The popular conversion of all Icelanders to Protestantism took more than a hundred years, hastened by the privations exacted by the Danish trade monopoly established in 1602. For further information on this era of Icelandic social history, see Gunnarsson (1983).

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and save, repair and demolish. In *The Juniper Tree*, Katla crosses the line from white to black magic as her relationship with Jónas deteriorates.

The rhymes that Keene composed for Katla and Margit are typical of Icelandic magical songs blended with saints' blessings. Further, Icelanders do distinguish between the conscious practice of spells and magic (Katla's activities) and the ability to *see*—perceive supernatural beings and ghosts (as Margit does). That ability runs in families, something you are born with and cannot learn; hence, Katla's hopeless envy of her younger sister's powers. Margit, for her part, is at first fearful of her gift of sight but learns to take comfort in it. Keene herself noted that whether the magic has efficacy or not, people's beliefs or fears make it a socially powerful force (2002).

Also true to the film's cultural historical location is the need for the two sisters to ally themselves physically and economically with Jóhann. In an exchange between the two children, Jónas attempts to establish the identity of the place from whence Margit and Katla came:

Jónas: Where are you and your sister from?
Margit: It's not there anymore.
Jónas: It disappeared?
Margit: No, there aren't any people there anymore. They're all gone.
Jónas: Will . . . you ever go back?
Margit: Katla says we'll stay here. That we're from here now.
Jónas: But you can't change where you're from.
Margit: But what if where you're from isn't there anymore?

In the scene that follows, as Katla prompts Margit to recall her experience of second sightedness (that is, seeing the shadows or spirits of the dead),[14] she comments that Jónas's mother wishes them to go away. Keene thus indicates something of an old-world politics of place, where identity and locality are inextricably linked. The viewer senses a battle between Jónas's dead mother and the usurper Katla, or, in a different interpretive register, within Katla's own psyche as she projects onto her predecessor her own sense of vulnerability and tenuous hold on the farm.

Katla and Jóhann manage a scrap of rented land, eking out a bare subsistence. Their mutual need is not so much emotional as a matter of survival. The alternative—servitude on a wealthier farm—would be risky

14 For more information on northern European (including Icelandic) concepts of second sight, see Flowers (1989, 55).

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for both genders but particularly so for young women, who faced rape and unwanted pregnancy, which would further a downward social spiral. The social historical reality is echoed psychologically. As feminist Nancy Chodorow argues, "Men love and fall in love romantically, women sensibly and rationally. . . . On the societal level, given especially economic inequality, men are exceedingly important to women" (1976, 462). Thus, the film is grounded in the material reality of women's lives, allowing the viewer to understand how Katla could be driven to battle a child to the death as a matter of her own and her sister's survival. Both psychologically and economically, to be without place or kin is a powerful punishment. The viewer understands the desperation behind Katla's spells since—without the skills and labor a man provides—she and her sister will likely perish or be forced into abusive servitude. With magic she tries to control those forces of chance and society that have already ostracized them.

The Grimms—Men and Mothers

> *Fairy tales are by nature very matriarchal worlds in which fathers are traditionally irresponsible or absent.*
>
> James Lapine, 1988 (54)

If *The Juniper Tree* is not a tale from Icelandic tradition about Icelandic experience, what are its meanings? Without suggesting that ours parallels Keene's, we offer an understanding of the film's feminist implications in keeping with the filmmaker's clear intention that the viewer interpellate her own vision. Until the burgeoning of feminist analysis of fairy tales, theorists tended to ignore salient aspects of gender in them.[15] In contrast, most feminist analyses of this narrative make family and gender relations central. Thus, for example, "stories such as . . . 'Juniper Tree' retain transformative power because they function both literally and figuratively. . . . When real violence is treated at a comfortable distance, as in a seemingly unrealistic folktale, both teller and listeners create their own space for making personal connections. These stories also function as an emotional release for

15 For example, because Bruno Bettelheim (1976) assumes essential human problems are genderless (implicitly male), his analysis cannot address the family dynamics in "The Juniper Tree."

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the stresses of ordinary day-to-day parenting or from childhood fantasies of feared abuse and abandonment" (Stone 1998, 192).

Folklorist Kay Stone pays attention to the son, noting that "this is one of the very few Grimm tales in which a victimized protagonist . . . avenges himself directly rather than having the villain punished obliquely" (Ibid., 69).[16] Teller Susan Gordon, who uses the story in "therapeutic, educational, and religious settings" (quoted in Stone, Jenoff, and Gordon 1997, 257), focuses upon the crucially absent father—the mother is the sole active parent. Maria Tatar says the tale "demonizes mothers in a powerful way and represents fathers as passive and detached" (2004, 210). Indeed, in the Grimms' "The Juniper Tree," the mother gets the final blame. Her death has no negative consequences for anyone, though the story repeatedly attributes her actions to the devil: "The devil got hold of her so that she began to hate the little boy . . . it was as if the devil had taken hold of her . . . the devil got her to speak sweetly to him . . . the devil prompted her" (Ibid., 191). The piggy father not only greedily eats the stew made of his son but also hoards it: "'Give me some more,' he said. 'No one else will get any. Somehow I feel as if it's all mine.' And he kept eating and threw the bones under the table until he had eaten everything" (Ibid., 192). He is rewarded with a gold chain.

Marina Warner links the father's incestuous cannibalism to that of mythic patriarchs like Kronos, who devour their children and then vomit them up whole: a motif of male parturition or, in effect, of male biological motherhood. She argues that

> the nameless father is portrayed as innocent, ignorant of his act of cannibal incest—or has he been shielded by the story from complicity in the dark events, as other fathers are in other tales in the Grimms' versions? However it may be, in "The Juniper Tree," incorporation into the father—when the little boy is unwittingly eaten for dinner—does not spell death for him. . . . Paternity, in this fairy tale as well as in the Greek myth of divine origin, can bring forth the whole child again. (1998, 63)

Warner links the parents' specific roles: "the sequence of fatal foods climaxes with the millstone for a murder weapon. The instrument for grinding good bread ends the life of a woman who put bad food before her family; only after she is dead can the family regroup around the restored, disinfected

16 Joseph Falaky Nagy also references kinship and family (1979; 1984).

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table in a scene of domestic—and patriarchal—stability" (Ibid., 65). Tatar says the Grimms' version of "The Juniper Tree" invokes "two alternative, mutually exclusive scenarios"—either that it exaggerates "a child's very real fears about parental aggression and engulfment"; or that it responds "to the distress felt by a child grown up under the weight of guilt . . . produced by the death of a mother during childbirth, or even by the symbolic 'psychic' death of a mother when she gives birth" (1992, 223); that is, immediately on becoming a mother, a woman's life is no longer her own, but subsumed to her child's.[17]

Scapegoating mothers, as the Grimm tale does, is a common technique not only in traditional folklore but also in popular cultural and hegemonic media narratives. Feminist film theorist E. Ann Kaplan argues that "the Mother as a complex person in her own right, with multiple roles to fill and conflicting needs and desires, is absent from patriarchal representations" (2000, 467). She is replaced by one-dimensional characters: "The Good Mother; who is all-nurturing and self-abnegating. . . . The Bad Mother . . . sadistic, hurtful, and jealous. . . .The Heroic Mother, who suffers and endures for the sake of her husband and children, [and] . . . The Silly, Weak, or Vain Mother . . . generally scorned and disparaged" (Ibid., 468). Similarly, folklorist Janet Langlois discusses the contemporary legend of "The Inept Mother," who can't deal with multiple, simultaneous, life-threatening crises and thus becomes the scapegoat for the consequences. Langlois argues, in mothers' defense, that "mothering is a domestic task in which both competence and incompetence are double-edged swords" (1993, 94) because the children must be trained for both closeness and independence, both obedience and the ability to think through their own solutions to problems. Thus, a competent mother trains her child for her own obsolescence.

Incompetence at mothering can prompt the heavy hand of the law. But alternatively, it can allow women space to be human within a role that expects them to be (always balanced and appropriately) all knowing, all nurturing, and all giving. Keene's film, unlike its Grimm precursor, recognizes

17 Warner, again citing Greek mythology, finds that unlike fathers, mothers "do not eat their own offspring on purpose, nor are they duped into feasting off their own children. This can hardly be because they are soft-hearted, given the extreme mayhem they perpetrate. Mothers in classical myth are infanticidal, but not incestuously cannibalistic, because the stories deal with the question of parental relations to nature and to generation. The act of eating represents an inverted birthing: biological ownership through incorporation" (1998, 56).

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this paradox. Mothers who fail at their impossible task—as they always must because it is impossible—face accusations that they have mutilated their children. Thus, Katla literally cuts up her stepson, but their mother mutilates Margit by binding her so closely that the daughter is unable to relinquish the relationship. That Euro-North American popular-culture representations of mothers paradoxically tend to view social (nonbiological) mothers as ideals and biological mothers as inadequate to utterly abjected (see Karpin 1997, 2000; Kaplan 1997; Ashe 1997) further complicates the love/hate relationship in these representations.[18] Indeed, the "dialectic between the maternal unrepresentable and the paternal already-represented" (Williams 2000, 489) forms a central tension in *The Juniper Tree*. Yet while motherhood is a concern for Keene, it's not the only primary relationship in her version; siblings, and particularly sisters, are also a focus.

Keene—Women and Sisters

> *You look like our mother did when she saw. Your eyes look the same. She could tell everything by what she saw. But I can't see.*
>
> Katla to Margit

The Juniper Tree presumes the centrality of women's relationships—(dead) mother to daughters; sisters to each other. The arguably male-centered tale becomes an unabashedly female-centered film. Teresa de Lauretis contends that feminist film focuses upon "both self-expression and communication with other women" (1987, 135), and Keene's work fits her description well. In the action that opens the story, the community has broken the triad of a mother and two daughters by burning the mother as a witch. There is no mention of the husband/father.[19] The film's men (son and father) are catalytic but also emotional and capricious, conflicted. The adult has dif-

18 Shuli Barzilai analyzes "Snow White" as a story of mothers (1990). In another genre, the film *Aliens* (directed by James Cameron, 1986) dramatizes the conflict between the Alien—a biomother whose oozing orifices and acid blood epitomize what Barbara Creed (1993) calls the "monstrous feminine"—and the capable, sensible, and resourceful Ripley (Signourney Weaver)—whose biological daughter dies of old age before her return and who becomes social mother to the child Newt (Carrie Henn).

19 His utter absence underlines Tatar's assertion that "The Juniper Tree" "eliminates both stepmother and biological mother in the end, yet it is . . . *matricentric* from beginning to end" (emphasis in original 1992, 221).

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ficulty reconciling the roles of father and husband; the child, of son and quasi-brother.

Folklorist Joseph Nagy suggests a theme of sibling rivalry in the tale, noting that although "the victim in 'The Juniper Tree' is slain by a stepmother . . . in the Grimm version the stepmother actually makes the victim's half-sister, her daughter, an unwitting accomplice in the act of murder" (1984, 188). The film focuses particularly on the often ambivalent relationship between the two sisters. Several scenes suggest that Margit is sexually compelled by her sister's husband. In one she stands by Katla and Jóhann's bed and touches first her sister and then the husband. In another, having searched for and found Margit who has wandered away from the house, Jóhann tells her a possibly cautionary tale about a wife who is stolen by trolls, who put her in "a glass box, asleep as if dead" (undated script). The viewer sees Margit envisioning herself in the glass box—as the story's inaccessible wife. Her attraction to Jóhann may involve a wish to replace her sister in his affections. However, given the absence of a father figure, it may equally refer to her wish for one and the extension of that desire onto the most available object.

The closest—though ambivalent—links in the film are between women. The males are alternately loving and violent to their female age mates (Jóhann slaps Katla, Jónas throws a stone at Margit), though the intergenerational relationships are consistently complex. As Nancy Chodorow explains, "male-female relationships seem to become strained in regularized ways . . . often taken to be accidental or due to the psychological peculiarities of particular women and men" (1976, 454). She thinks this pattern—as well as the potential rivalry between women—is a result of a patriarchal model that makes women as mothers primarily responsible for their children's care. In particular, since "her first love object is a woman, a girl, in order to attain her proper heterosexual orientation, must transfer her primary object choice to her father and men" (Ibid., 457) while retaining a close identification with her mother. Men must become erotic objects but remain secondary because they follow mothers and women as emotional objects. Boys, on the other hand, understand their father as a rival for their mothers' affections. Chodorow argues that "a daughter turns to her father looking for . . . confirmation and a sense of separateness from her mother, and cares especially about being loved. She (and the woman she becomes) is willing to deny her father's limitations (and those of her lovers or husband)

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as long as she feels loved, and she is . . . able to do this because his distance means that she does not really know him" (Ibid., 460).

Margit isn't sister only to Katla; she is simultaneously Jónas's nonbiological half sister (and his stepaunt) and his father, Jóhann's, sister-in-law. Culturally as well as personally, such relationships can be difficult, but Keene adds not only the problem of sisters and brothers who live together and are not biologically related but also that of husband to wife's sister.[20] Margit seems torn between her relationship to her sister and her quasi-brothers. Her role conflicts drive the plot—does she want to be Jóhann's sister, daughter, or wife? Does she want to be Jónas's sister or mother? Is she Katla's sister or her rival? The questions, more than the answers, texture *The Juniper Tree.*

The result of this complex web of relationships is a "triangular affective constellation" (Ibid., 461), complicated in both tale and film versions of "The Juniper Tree" by the presence of a stepmother, and in the film version by the relationships of sisters, and sister to brother-in-law and stepnephew, within the apparent nuclear family. Both tale and film explore ideas surrounding the composition of the heterosexual family. But Keene—by ridding the story of the boy's act of vengeance—bypasses a simplistic moral closure that eliminates the evil stepmother. Thus, the distribution of good and evil becomes more ambivalent, and motherhood is neither romanticized nor excoriated.

Hollywood woman's films—rarely made *by* women—were and are made *for* women. Linda Williams argues that "the device of devaluing and debasing the actual figure of the mother while sanctifying the institution of motherhood is typical of the 'woman's film' in general" (2000, 479). Not a woman's film in the latter, conventional sense, *The Juniper Tree* refuses either alternative. Those characters who worship the mother (Margit and Jónas) fall victim to their convictions that she is eternal or immortal. But the actual mother figures—the manifest ghost of Margit and Katla's mother and Katla herself as stepmother—are each, in her own way, problematic and imperfect. Quite literally, Margit embodies the psychological maturation of women because she "develops her feminine gender identity in the *presence* of an ongoing relationship with the specific person of her mother" (Williams 2000, 485; emphasis in original).

20 Marriage to a deceased wife's sister but, significantly, not to a deceased husband's brother was illegal for a time in parts of Britain and Europe (Brown 2004).

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Melancholia

I wanted to leave the little girl as the main character still because it's her experience in the new world that she goes into after they flee their home. But I wanted to make it more of a spiritual experience, more of a deeper personal experience for her than it was in the original tale.

Nietzchka Keene, 2002

In making Margit the central protagonist—especially because the viewer exegetically shares her gift of second sight—Keene creates an additional focal point of the film: death, mourning, and the transition between childhood and womanhood. Sigmund Freud's early descriptions of the concept of melancholia called it an inability to grieve properly, where the melancholic "repudiates the finite process of mourning, languishing instead in the refusal to grieve. . . . [T]he lost object is finally incorporated into the self, turned into the shelter of the ego, and preserved as a form of ghostly identification. In this refusal to sever any attachment to the lost object, the melancholic becomes instead haunted by it" (Eng 2000, 1276). This process is literally embodied in Margit, who regularly sees her mother's ghost; and ambivalently in Jónas, who accepts Margit's assertions that his real mother is present, watching over him and giving him a gift.

The film addresses the ambivalence of motherhood and its relationship to mourning. Even when mothers do not literally die—Jónas's in childbirth and Katla and Margit's by execution/murder—becoming one means the loss of ego because the child's interests are expected to become primary (Barzilai 1990). Katla has difficulty mothering Jónas because she retains self-interest. She and Margit grieve the death of their mother. Katla also grieves her lack of the gift of seeing, which her dead mother possessed and Margit has inherited. Jónas mourns his mother's death, and his own death prevents closure of that experience.

The conflict between Katla and Jónas is particularly sad because of their common experience of melancholia, of "unspeakable loss and inexorable suffering . . . a pathological form of mourning [in which they are] unable 'properly' to grieve the loss" (Eng 2000, 1276). Freud eventually repudiated his pathological evaluation of melancholia, seeing it instead "as a constitutive psychic mechanism engendering subjectivity itself" (Ibid., 1277). However, Julia Kristeva links melancholia, depression, and mourning, saying that they

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conceal "an aggression toward the lost object, thus revealing the ambivalence of the depressed person with respect to the object of mourning" (1989, 11). She sees women's and men's (heterosexual) development as melancholic particularly because of the need to sacrifice the relationship with the mother (see also Butler [1990] 1999).

Jónas's uncontrollable anger against his stepmother may be an expression of his actual anger against his (biological) mother for leaving him, thus dividing the mother figure into an object of worship and one of abhorrence.[21] His explosive reaction to Katla—"she's a witch! she's a witch! she's a witch! she's a witch!"—is reminiscent of Kristeva's description of the melancholic's language: "I cannot inscribe my violence in 'no,' nor in any other sign. I can expel it only by means of gestures, spasms, or shouts. I impel it, I project it. My necessary Thing is also and absolutely my enemy, my foil, the delightful focus of my hatred" (1989, 15). Because Jónas's mother has actually died, "the . . . violence of matricidal drive . . . entails, when it is hindered, its inversion on the self; the maternal object having been introjected, the depressive or melancholic putting to death of the self is what follows" (Ibid., 28). But in their common mourning for their mothers, Jónas refuses to give her up, and Katla's fear of the discovery that her mother was considered a witch prevents her from making him an ally. Their common repression of anger against their mothers for leaving them creates murderous intentions in Katla and suicidal ones in Jónas, though each mistakes that fury as directed against the other.

Keene represents Margit's ambivalence to her mother more graphically. The girl twice encounters her mother as hole, not whole. The most striking image in *The Juniper Tree* is the ghost with "a hole where her heart should be" (undated script). Dori Laub sees the black hole as an indication of trauma (1992, 64-65), potentially linking the mother's ghost to Margit's actual experience of loss. Keene provides a powerful image of the physical experience of grief. Margit is befriending Jónas and telling of the way she sees her own mother. After the girl helps him perform magic beside his mother's grave—using threads to protect him—he leaves, and her mother appears. Margit inserts her hand into a black hole in her mother's chest, accompanied by what the script calls "vision music." This image resonates

21 Nancy Chodorow might differ that the mother and stepmother have fundamentally different roles, explaining that "the boy's 'normal contempt' for women . . . is a pathological and defensive reaction to the . . . sense of inescapable maternal omnipotence" (1976, 463–64).

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because the hole in the diaphragm coincides with the frequent location of the sensation of grief: below the ribs. Julia Kristeva describes the black hole as a manifestation of female depression: "A nothingness that is neither repression nor simply the mark of the affect, but condenses into a *black hole*—like invisible, crushing, cosmic antimatter—the sensory, sexual, fantasy-provoking ill-being of abandonment and disappointments" (1989, 87). The image also critically evokes the notion of women as simultaneously visual object and absence explored extensively in both poststructuralist feminism and film theory.

Telling Tales

Every telling of a story is a fragment and a transformation; it stimulates emotions and perceptions and, in so doing, connects the teller to social context. As there are many interpretations of any fairy tale—and of "The Juniper Tree" in particular—there seem to have been many Nietzchka Keenes. Her colleagues and students praised her knowledge and dedication. Those Anne interviewed in Iceland, who worked on *The Juniper Tree,* spoke of her ebullience, talents, drive, and individuality. But her friend, the film's associate producer, Patrick Moyroud, commented that "to people who met Nietzchka the first time, she could seem eccentric, stubborn and hard to know, except on her own terms" (quoted in Liedl 2004). His insight oddly echoes the impressions of many, ourselves included, who have approached *The Juniper Tree.* Keene's wish to dislocate the tale from any particular location or time and her obvious feminist perspective give us permission to construe her film in our own ways. Yet throughout, we have experienced what has proven to be a creative tension. On the one hand, viewing the film has unleashed the pleasures of interpretation, speculating about possible meanings. On the other hand, we wish to respect the filmmaker's intention that her work be experienced first and foremost as a story in its own right and not as metaphor—or object of analysis! Indeed, however univocal our final result may seem, it is the result of considerable disagreement among the two authors about what the film and filmmaker (allow us to) say. But given the generic and archetypal quality of fairy tales, an openness echoed in this film—as it is in no other that we know—that's probably as it should be.

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